

**Agenda Item**  
**June 19, 2006 Land Board Meeting**

**Requesting Authorization for the**  
**Proposed Acquisition of an Heritage Property**

**Proposal:** Under provisions of §22-3-1003 (10) MCA, the Montana Heritage Preservation and Development Commission (Commission) requests Land Board approval to accept a donation of a heritage property known as the "Pioneer Cabin" in Last Chance Gulch. This acquisition would address the Commission's Legislative mandate to seek other heritage properties and the economies of scale associated with managing the adjacent properties (i.e., Reeder's Alley.)

**Property Donation:** The proposed donation property will be referred to as "Pioneer Cabin". The total land area is 0.87 acres, bordered by Reeder's Alley (also owned by the Commission) to the West, Benton Avenue to the North, and Heritage Park to the East and South, is located in the NE4NE4 of Section 36, T 10 N, R 4 W and includes a cabin, the caretaker's house, and two outbuildings situated just off Park Avenue in Last Chance Gulch in Helena, Lewis & Clark County, Montana. (See maps in Exhibit A.)

**History:** On June 17, 2005 the Last Chance Gulch Restoration Association (Association), the current owners of the "Pioneer Cabin" property, asked the Commission if they would be interested in acquiring the real and associated personal property as a donation. The property includes an endowment of approximately \$57,000 that is administered by the Montana Community Foundation. The cabin and house are the dominant and historic buildings on the property; the outbuildings are currently used for storage. (See photos in Exhibit A.) This property is a significant historical property that is rich in community history and historic trends as the gold camp emerged from camp to capitol city. The Commission analyzed the feasibility of the proposed donation and followed the procedures set forth in their acquisition rules. The attached Exhibit A is A Real Property Acquisition Feasibility Study (Study). The study concludes that the property meets the Commission's acquisition criteria relative to history, has a positive cash flow, and is in good condition. Final approval for acceptance of the proposed donation, pending Land Board approval, was given by the Commission at its April 5, 2006 meeting.

**The Board of Land Commissioners' Land Donation Policy (02/12/2003):**

- **Appraisal** – Given that the "Pioneer Cabin" is an historical and cultural property, an appraisal was not deemed necessary.
- **Survey** – A survey is not required. The property location is Lots 2-4, Block 12 and Lots 19, 20, 25, 26, 27 & 28, Block 61 of the Helena Original Townsite, together with a portion of closed and vacated Jefferson Street in 1987 as disclosed in Ordinance No. 2050 recorded in M Book 5, Page 410 and Resolution No. 9903 in M Book 7, Page 5474 and corrected in M Book 7, Page 6252 in the records of Lewis and Clark County, Montana.
- **Hazardous Waste & Materials Inventory** - The EA and Hazardous Materials Inventory were completed and show no cause for alarm. The Decision Notice dated March 14, 2006 is attached as Exhibit B.
- **Title Report** - A title report was conducted and reviewed by Legal Counsel.
- **Public Notice** - The Commission published a public notice in a local newspaper allowing for public comments from June 2005 through January 30, 2006. On January 30, 2006 a public hearing was held in compliance with the scoping and public notification process for MEPA. There was no opposition to the proposed donation.

- **Property Inspection Report** – A "Conditions Assessment" of the buildings and grounds was conducted on November 10, 2005 by the Historic Architecture Specialist of the Montana State Historic Preservations Office. Photos and a personal property inventory can be found in Exhibit A.
- **Special Conditions** –
  - Costs to manage - The Association's income and expense statement will act as a guideline to the Commission for costs associated with managing the Pioneer Cabin. There are a number of current maintenance issues that will require approximately \$5,000 to complete; the cataloguing and cleaning of the collection of artifacts in the Cabin is estimated at \$1,000.
    - The Commission will receive revenue from the rental of the caretaker's house, rentals of \$200 to \$300 for special events such as weddings, donations, and possibly future grants for the operation and maintenance of the property.
    - A "Montana Community Foundation Gift Agreement" for the Pioneer Cabin Endowment Fund was made on March 11, 2005 between the Pioneer Cabin, a Montana nonprofit charitable organization, and the Montana Community Foundation, Inc. (Foundation). The Foundation will continue to administer the endowment of approximately \$57,000 that accompanies the proposed property donation and may be used to help finance capital improvements to the "Pioneer Cabin". The endowment will help ensure that the property remains self-supporting. The Pioneer Cabin Endowment Fund Statement is included in Exhibit A.
  - Future Challenges that are presented are the recruiting and training volunteers, additional costs for staff time to coordinate volunteer program, and fundraising or grants to cover the costs of extended operations and capital improvements. The Association has agreed to assist in fundraising activities.
- **Anticipated Use** – Tours of the Cabin and regular hours of operation with volunteers and /or add the resource of college interns during the summer. The caretaker's residence will continue to be rented at the current rate and other rentals will occur on a periodic basis. The Lewis & Clark Library may be interested in using the Cabin or grounds periodically for a summer reading hour or reading program.
- **Title Transfer** – A deed will be given to the Commission by the Association assuming approval of the Land Board. An Agreement for the prorating and payment of the 2006 taxes for city services, a lien which is not yet due and payable, will be executed between the parties at the time of the transfer of the deed.

**Benefit to the State:** Accepting the proposed donation is partial fulfillment of the Commission's Legislative mandate to seek other heritage properties and the economies of scale associated with managing the adjacent properties (i.e., Reeder's Alley.) This property can provide significant information about life in early Montana, mining, women's social issues, family life, and Chinese settlement patterns can be associated with these buildings as well. The "Pioneer Cabin" has a positive cash flow and is self-supporting. Future donations, fundraisers, the annual rental revenue of \$3,900 for the Caretaker's Cabin, and an occasional \$200 to \$300 from special events rentals will go into the Commission's Fund for operational and maintenance expenses.

**Recommendation:** The Executive Director of the Montana Heritage Preservation and Development Commission recommends that the Land Board approve the acceptance of the proposed donation of the "Pioneer Cabin." The acceptance of this gift would include the Commission becoming the beneficiary of the endowment of approximately \$57,000.



# **PIONEER CABIN & CARETAKER'S HOUSE**

**HELENA, MONTANA**

## **REAL PROPERTY ACQUISITION FEASIBILITY STUDY**

**prepared for the**

**MONTANA HERITAGE PRESERVATION AND DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION**

**December, 2005**

# PIONEER CABIN & CARETAKER'S HOUSE

## HELENA, MONTANA



## REAL PROPERTY ACQUISITION

### PUBLIC HEARING MINUTES

#### ATTACHMENTS

1. [Outside Photographs](#)
2. [Environmental Assessment](#)
3. [Hazardous Materials Report](#)
4. [Historic Photographs](#)
5. [Conditions Assessment prepared by the State Historic Preservation Office](#)
6. [Incomplete inventory of artifacts](#)
7. [Interior Photos](#)
8. [Last Chance Gulch Restoration Association income/expense statement](#)
9. [Gift Agreement](#)
10. [Pioneer Cabin Endowment statement](#)
11. [Last Chance Gulch Restoration Association Membership History](#)

## Introduction

In 2004, representatives of the Last Chance Gulch Preservation Association (Association), owners of the Pioneer Cabin and Caretaker's House and adjacent property, informally approached staff of the Montana Heritage Commission (Commission) to inquire if the Commission would be interested in acquiring the real and personal property as a donation. The request was made in a formal manner when Ms. Jean Weeks and Ms. Joan Poston from the Association appeared at the 17<sup>th</sup> June 2005 Commission meeting in Virginia City. The Commission approved a study of the potential acquisition.

The Pioneer Cabin and the Caretaker's House are situated just off Park Avenue in Last Chance Gulch in Helena. These are the two dominant and historic buildings on the property, but there are also two out buildings that currently are used for storage. The property consists of 0.87 acres of land, bordered by Reeder's Alley to the West, Benton Avenue to the North, and Heritage Park to the East and South. The site has a small lawn area and numerous flower gardens. Towards the Northeast the land is mostly rock outcroppings with a steep slope. An historic stone wall with a wooden railing separate the property from Reeder's Alley. Mature trees grace the open lawn area and provide shade in the summer. The site has three trees planted and marked as memorials to women associated with the property. Please see the attached [Outside Photos](#) for views of the property.

This study attempts to analyze the feasibility of the acquisition, including real and personal property, and follows the procedures set forth in the acquisition rules promulgated by the Commission and adopted in April 2000.

An [Environmental Assessment](#) and an [Environmental Site Audit Form](#) (Hazardous Materials Report) accompany this report and show no significant impacts or issues should this property be acquired.

This report concludes with a recommendation that the Pioneer Cabin property be acquired by the Montana Heritage Commission.

We acknowledge the significant contributions of Dr. Ellen Baumler, Interpretive Historian of the Montana Historical Society, and Mr. Pete Brown from the State Historic Preservation Office, in the preparation of this report, and thank Dr. Arnold Olsen, former Director of the Montana Historical Society, for approving their participation. We also thank the many people who agreed to review early drafts and whose comments added much to the study.

- 1. Does the property represent the State's culture and history? Consider the quality of the significance of the property in Montana history, including the property's authenticity and integrity of location, design, setting, materials, and workmanship; its age; and its aesthetic or historic sense of place or period of time.**

Wilson Butts, a veteran of the California gold rush, arrived at Last Chance with the first wave of miners in the summer of 1864. Born in Montgomery County, Indiana, Butts prospected in California from 1849 to 1854, returning to the states via Nicaragua. Wilson traveled to Montana

from Missouri and arrived at Bannack July 10, 1863. He was in a good position to join the rush to Last Chance when gold was discovered the following summer on July 14, 1864. His timely arrival is evident in the excellent location of his claim along the banks of Last Chance Stream that once flowed directly past the cabin he built. The small but serviceable one-room of hewn and un-hewn logs, chinked to keep out impending winter cold, is the back room of the present Pioneer Cabin. It is the oldest documented dwelling in Helena, and the only documented miner's cabin built during the first months after the Last Chance discovery. The Butts family's unpublished reminiscences, housed at the Montana Historical Society's research center, chronicle their stay during the mining camp's earliest period of settlement and document the time and sequences of their cabin's construction history.

Butts wintered in the cabin during 1864-1865, working the claim. In the spring, his brother Jonas joined him, bringing his wife Louanna and their three young daughters Sarah Anne, Derinda Jane, and Arminda Ellen. The family lived in their covered wagon until the second room of hand-hewn logs, square-notched at the corners, had been built in front of Wilson's bachelor cabin. The new room with its large front window, the first glass on the gulch, served as parlor and bedroom for the family of five. Early maps clearly show the two distinct parts of the cabin as separate dwellings.

There is no other building or mining camp remnant in Helena that can better interpret this very early period of occupation. Family documentation of the building sequence makes the Pioneer Cabin a rare and precious landmark.

Items inside the cabin span the time period from the 1860s to the 1880s. Several artifacts may be original to the cabin. These include a chair made of a cutting board with horse-collar backrest, the pie safe in the kitchen, and the hutch, also in the kitchen.

The Butts' neighbors were Rachel and William Davenport, who settled in the Helena area and became well known in later decades. Daughter Sallie married A. J. Davidson, a well-known territorial legislator, businessman, and cattleman. The Butts family reminiscences place Rachel and William Davenport as the nearest next-door neighbors. This written documentation adds significantly to the construction history of the house next door, known as the "Caretaker's House." The un-sided northeast wall of the Caretaker's House is nearly identical to the walls of the Pioneer Cabin. This suggests that the original log cabin core of the Caretaker's House was the Davenports' first home, and that it is contemporary with at least the 1865 building phase of the Pioneer Cabin.

Sallie Davenport wrote about the family's journey west aboard the stern-wheeler *St. John* en route to Fort Benton. Several days into the voyage, measles broke out and all the children on board were sick. All three Davenport children were very ill. Only Sallie, oddly the more delicate of the three children, recovered. Willie died as the boat docked at Fort Benton and Anna lingered until she died on September 6, 1865.

At the same time that Jonas and Wilson Butts built the front room onto their cabin, William Davenport built his log cabin next door. Sallie wrote:



“It had a board partition, so that it made two rooms. Two fair size glass windows and a roof made of slabs, covered with dirt, and slabs on top of the dirt. But, at the first heavy rain, there was not a dry spot in the house, and when that dirt was thoroughly soaked, it would drip for days....”

The kitchen stove in the Pioneer Cabin reportedly belonged to the Davenports, used in the Caretaker’s House next door.

The Buttses sold their cabin when a hurdy-gurdy house opened on the corner of Clore (now Park) and Bridge (now State) streets. The owner was well-known madam Chicago Joe Hensley’s first Helena business. The music could be clearly heard from the Butts' cabin. One of the Butts granddaughters wrote:

“The music was going at all hours and often voices raised in song or in fighting were heard. The coming and going of rough and drunk men and painted women was a common sight. So Jonas and his wife were no longer happy in their situation as they felt it was no place in which to rear three girls.”

The Buttses relocated to Dry Gulch and sold their cabin to newlyweds Stephen and Luella Gilpatrick in the fall of 1867. Luella was a daughter of well-known pioneer James Fergus. Her future husband came west from Wisconsin in 1863 on an American Fur Company steamer. He arrived just after the Alder Gulch discovery, and headed there to try his luck. When prospecting yielded no great fortune, Gilpatrick worked a claim for Fergus and thus met his future bride. He and Luella were married on New Year’s Day, 1867, at the Fergus ranch in the Prickly Pear valley. The Gilpatricks settled into the Butts' former cabin. Stephen, who later served as county sheriff, was the Oliver Express agent and with a partner ran Helena’s first stationery store. Stephen and Luella planted two small locust seedlings carefully brought to Montana in coffee cans. These were the first non-native trees planted in Helena and they long provided the only shade in the neighborhood. The Gilpatricks lived in the cabin for several years and their son George was born there. In 1869 the Gilpatricks moved out of town to manage the King and Gillette toll road, returning to Helena in 1870 to build a fine home on the west side. Louis C. and Theresa Henry took up residency for the next few years at the Pioneer Cabin. Louis, a well-known boot and shoemaker, was a Union veteran of the Civil War who came to Montana in the mid-1860s, prospected at nearby Unionville and then returned to Minnesota for his family. Theresa Henry’s tiny sewing machine, brought by steamboat to Fort Benton and used to make George’s baby clothes in the cabin, is in the front room. After the Henrys, occupancy of the Pioneer Cabin and its two neighbors to the south becomes murky and title history to the property is muddled until the turn of the twentieth century.

As the Gilpatricks’ locust trees grew to be sturdy saplings, the character of the area began to change. Below the Pioneer Cabin and its contemporaries a whole new community thrived. The substantial Chinese population – more than 600 out of Helena’s 3,000 resident in 1870, spread out below Clore Street, now Park Street. Chinese residents cultivated extensive gardens in this area supplying fresh produce to Helenans from the early settlement period into the twentieth century. Most Chinese came to Montana initially to placer mine, but Chinese citizens in Helena provided domestic services, operated laundries, restaurants, pharmacies, groceries and

mercantiles in the blocks below Clore Street. Chinese citizens also owned property and paid taxes. Although the Chinese made significant contributions to the early community, in Helena as in other western communities, this ethnic group was discriminated against, segregated into its own district in work and home life, and the dead were buried outside the boundaries of city cemeteries.

While the Pioneer Cabin was not occupied by Chinese, its near neighbor on the other side of the alley was home to the Yee Wau brothers during the 1870s-1880s. The Yee Wau cabin is the only remaining Chinese-associated dwelling in Helena. Rare Chinese artifacts in the Pioneer Cabin found in the neighborhood include an abacus, a large basket, several woven jars, and riffles used in placer mining—not necessarily Chinese in origin, but certainly used by the early Chinese miners at Last Chance Gulch.

Historic Sanborn-Perris Fire Insurance maps of 1888, 1890, and 1892 clearly show small brothels and cribs encroaching on the little neighborhood that once had housed hard-working families. The proximity of prostitutes even in the 1860s was a factor in the Butts family's exodus from Helena, but by the 1880s, the women were firmly entrenched along Clore (now Park) Street. Labeled "female boarding," the red light district nestled against the hillside from Wall Street to the Davenports' former cabin, now sided with wood and enlarged, at the entrance to Reeder's Alley. At least twenty-two women worked and lived along the block in 1890. Although the Pioneer Cabin itself is never labeled "female boarding," its resident in 1890 was one Jennie Dwyer, a woman whose transience is consistent with that of other prostitutes in settlements across the west. The Caretaker's House and the Pioneer Cabin are Helena's only surviving remnants of what was once a thriving red light district along today's South Park Street. In fact, the small extensions at the back of the Caretaker's House were used as cribs—one-room offices where women conducted business. Interestingly, the wall that runs along the East side of Reeder's Alley was installed *over* the cribs' windows, likely in an attempt to confine the women and prevent their solicitation into Reeder's Alley. The alley itself was never part of the red light district.

Please see the attached [Historic Photos](#) for a few views of the property.

## **2. Does the property lend itself to programs to interpret Montana history?**

The property is directly or indirectly connected to a number of historic themes, including the beginnings of settlement as outlined above, mining and the life of miners, Chinese influence, prostitution, building construction techniques, and life of the common man and woman. Interpretive opportunities are endless and many of these stories can only be told here. The Pioneer Cabin's and Caretaker's House's associations with Reeder's Alley also allows fuller interpretive opportunities to tell the little-known, complete story of this territorial period neighborhood.

One option is to establish an historical interpretation area in one of the buildings on the Pioneer Cabin property or the adjacent Reeder's Alley properties (which are currently owned and operated by the Commission). At present, other than cabin tours given by reservation only, visitors are limited to outdoor signage and to the facades of the buildings. The allocation of one



small area to interpretation could give visitors an orientation to not only the significance of both sites--its builders and early history--but also that of the area around it, including placer mining history and the role Chinese played. The Stonehouse Restaurant in Reeder's Alley contains numerous photos of the complex area; these could be installed in this new small visitor's center. There exist Sanborn maps of what the Alley looked like before Urban Renewal. In fact, the history of Last Chance Gulch, including the role of the so-called "Four Georgians," could be portrayed here probably better than in any other place.

There are several potential partners that may be willing to participate in a joint venture to establish an historical interpretation area. These include the Helena Chamber of Commerce, Downtown Helena, the Montana Historical Society, and the City of Helena. The addition of partners may change the focus of interpretation to include a broader 'gulch' approach.

### **3. Is the property associated with events that have made a significant contribution to Montana history and prehistory? Would the property contribute to the economic and social enrichment of Montana?**

The Pioneer Cabin and the Caretaker's House were listed in the National Register of Historic Places as part of the Helena Historic District (24LC883) on June 2, 1972. The properties are associated with the gold rush, with placer mining, with early settlement patterns, family life on the frontier, ethnic populations (Chinese), and topics related to women's and social history of the west. It is very unusual to have all these themes suggested in only two properties.

The property has already enriched the economic and social life of Montana by preserving an important record and part of our history and encouraging tourists to visit and spend. The 1938 date for the founding of the Last Chance Gulch Restoration Association precedes even the Bovey era and may have national significance as one of the West's earliest preservation movements.

### **4. Is the property associated with the lives of a person or persons who were significant in Montana history?**

Pioneer families associated with these buildings include the Wilson Butts family, the Davenport and A.J. Davidson families, the James Fergus/Stephen Gilpatrick families (the Gilpatrick -Root House at 604 Dearborn was recently listed in the National Register of Historic Places) and the Louis Henrys. All families were very early residents of Montana territory who remained to become part of the active Helena community. Both James Fergus and A. J. Davidson were well known figures in Montana territorial and early state history.

Louis Reeder's fame is indirectly associated with the Pioneer Cabin. His story is the story of many immigrants who traveled to this land in search of a new beginning. Louis Reeder deserves mention because of the proximity of Reeder's Alley to the Pioneer Cabin. The advent of the railroad in 1883 had Helena bursting at the seams with new buildings under construction all over town. Such industry unfortunately bred many accidents. The Helena Daily Herald reported on August 26, 1884, that a scaffold upon which Louis Reeder was working to repair a chimney collapsed. Reeder was transported to the hospital on Catholic Hill where doctors in attendance

announced that there was no hope for his recovery. Coincidentally, that same day another scaffold collapsed injuring three men and the Herald took the opportunity to warn, "Such careless accidents are too common....; work and enterprise are apt to blind these industrious workmen to the first law of nature." Reeder succumbed to his injuries the following evening, naming his brother, Huston, heir to his Helena properties. These included Reeder's Alley, at least one rental house in the Sixth Ward near the new depot, and Reeder's own house on West Main Street. The estate totaled some \$25,000 to \$30,000 and some of it, including Reeder's Alley, remained in the Reeder family until after the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In general (and with many specifics to back it up), the Pioneer Cabin can be said to be associated with the many typical 'worker bees' that built this country and led their lives in social interactions we enjoy knowing about.

**5. Does the property embody distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction representing an event, way of life, groups of persons, or trends in Montana history?**

The two cabins clearly show early construction methods and changes in building techniques and uses. The Butts' original one-room cabin, the front room, and the "breezeway" between the two (added as a connector some time later), beautifully illustrate the skills and handiwork of the adventurous miners who risked everything to take a chance on the gold rush, then opted to stay. Later residents also contributed to this construction history. Thorough documentation of nearly every decade of the buildings by historic photographs, along with early construction histories as documented by the first residents, provides an unparalleled building history. Although the buildings look much the same today, historically the landscape was stripped of vegetation. Two locust trees planted in front of the Butts cabin, brought west as seedlings in lard cans, provided the only shade for many decades.

Above the cabins, Louis Reeder crafted his buildings in both stone and brick masonry and their design, especially the brick tenements, reflect urban housing trends he brought from home and translated here into a simple vernacular form. A log cabin, likely standing on the property when Reeder acquired it, was incorporated into the complex. The Stonehouse Restaurant at the top of the hill was originally three separate buildings. The largest of these was once partitioned into four small apartments; the individual entrances are still readily visible. Another building, now the private dining room at the southwest end, was once a two-story dwelling. The kitchen was two small detached apartments. Other buildings that no longer stand served as bunkhouses, stables and more dwellings.

Below these hilltop structures along the slope are Reeder's distinctive red brick tenements. The bricks used in these tenements have been the subject of a persistent legend linking the alley to artist Charlie Russell. Russell's family owned the Parker-Russell Mining and Manufacturing Company in St. Louis, one of the nation's leading makers of fire brick. Some of the bricks of Reeder's Alley are rumored to have come by ox team from the Parker-Russell Company. However, Reeder's Alley contains no fire brick, and by the 1870s when Reeder began his housing project, locally-produced brick was readily available. If any Parker-Russell bricks indeed made their way to Helena, they would more likely have been used for industrial purposes

such as lining the massive lime kilns (constructed between the late 1860s and the 1890s) at the end of West Main Street.

Taken together and separately, the cabins, brick, and stone buildings in this complex show distinctive characteristics that record construction activity in Helena and Montana's early days. Viewed as a complex of buildings, the Pioneer Cabin and Reeder's Alley provide an excellent window into the past of Helena and its growth from a mining settlement into a more urban area.

**6. Has the property yielded or is likely to yield information important to Montana history or prehistory?**

As noted in the answers to other questions of this report, these properties are rich in community history and historic trends as the gold camp emerged from camp to capital city. Information about life in early Montana, mining, women's social issues, family life, and Chinese settlement patterns can be associated with these buildings as well. Additional information will certainly be discovered as interest in the buildings increases and researchers look for more associations. This area is very rich in history and potential discoveries.

**7. Describe the location of the property and its proximity to population centers, to other areas of historical and popular interest, and to standard tourist routes. Consider the difficulty or ease in access to the property.**

The Pioneer Cabin is located in the heart of downtown Helena. The site, along with Reeder's Alley, has been mentioned in tourism marketing literature for many years, and is seen as one of the 'draws' to the town. The nearby walking mall contains numerous historic buildings, currently used for retail and office space. Ample services such as hotels, food, retail, etc., can be found in the immediate vicinity.

**8. What is the likelihood of individual, public, corporate or government financial support?**

The immediate future indicates limited need for outside support of this project at this time. In the long run, some sort of capital fund raising will be needed to replace roofing and other capital maintenance needs, although funds generated from an endowment associated with the property (\$50,000; see below) could partially cover these costs. At that time we would look for corporate, government and private support. The success of such a request cannot be predicted at this time due to many variables such as individual financial conditions, company profits, inflation, government surpluses, etc. However, in the next ten to fifteen years the biggest transfer of wealth in the history of America will take place, as the parents of the baby boomers pass on. The cabins have a history of being able to touch many Helena residents. With the right presentation of the needs of the site, we would anticipate continued financial support from the community.

We would hope that the Last Chance Gulch Restoration Association would continue to assist with fundraising activities through memberships and special campaigns.

The complex is also a natural tie with other historic research facilities owned by the Commission and can further the training efforts in historic preservation techniques. In the long term, fee-based training in historic preservation techniques could reduce the need for outside support.

**9. What is the estimated cost of restoration, rehabilitation or maintenance of the property?**

In general, the property is in good condition.

There are a number of current maintenance issues that need to be addressed. The roof of the Cabin needs attention and costs are estimated at \$800 - \$1,000. Daubing exterior walls is expected to cost \$300 - \$500. The trees on site need attention and pruning costs could run as high as \$2,000. Add another \$500 - 1,000 for miscellaneous repairs. Total maintenance costs range from \$3,600 to \$4,000. Add \$1,000 for curatorial costs for a total of \$5,000.

Please see the attached document [Conditions Assessment prepared by the State Historic Preservation Office](#) prepared by Pete Brown of the State Historic Preservation Office for details.

It is noteworthy that the Association devoted significant resources to the properties in 2005. This included extensive work on the flower gardens and repairs to the plumbing in the Caretaker's House.

A collection of artifacts ([inventory attached](#)) is included in the property transfer. The collection will have to be catalogued and cleaned. Certain items will need conservation efforts. Costs are estimated at \$1,000.

A few [Interior Photos](#) of the Pioneer Cabin and some of the collection are attached to this document.

**10. What is the degree of popular and educational interest in the property?**

The property is well known in the Helena area and by those interested in history throughout the state. The Helena newspaper and other newspapers have published several articles about the Pioneer Cabin. There are many interesting stories associated with the property. If properly distributed, these stories can make the site more popular, as well as provide a glimpse into our past.

The occupants of the Pioneer Cabin have had some very colorful neighbors. At the foot of the alley, Helena's large Chinese community spread out into the area where the state office building is today. Expansive vegetable gardens, diverse businesses and dwellings covered at least five city blocks. Today the only standing building associated with the Chinese community is the cabin to the south at the foot of Reeder's Alley. By 1879 it was owned by the Yee Wah brothers who long operated a grocery store at 304 S. Main.

Anywhere there were miners with spending potential, there were also female followers. These gold camp "groupies" moved from place to place eager to make fortunes, too. Words of a

favorite miners' ballad recall that, "First came the miners to work in the mines, then came the ladies who lived on the line." The proximity of these working ladies was certainly part of the reason that the Butts family left Helena. Later on during the 1880s and 1890s, small cribs and houses of prostitution (euphemistically labeled "female boarding" on historic fire insurance maps) were tucked against the hillside all along South Park Avenue from Wall Street almost to the Butts cabin. At least twenty-two women worked and lived on the block in 1890. The shops of a Chinese doctor, pharmacist and tailor served as a buffer zone between later residents of the cabin and these women of "the line."

In 1897, the Helena Weekly Herald reported that as streetcar driver Bob Murray cut through Reeder's Alley on his way home after dinner, he caught a glint of something in the rain-swollen gutter. He picked up a gold nugget valued at \$3.10. Soon half the nearby Chinese community was panning for gold right in the alley, and resident caretaker James Gorman had all he could do to keep them at bay. No more gold was found, but the Herald speculated that the nugget washed down from Mount Helena to let residents know that "there is plenty of gold up there if they will only seek for it." Was this incident fact or fiction? The story's appearance on April Fool's Day is cause for speculation.

Reeder's Alley served as a carriage path for young girls from the west side attending St. Vincent's Academy on Catholic Hill. Because the alley housed unmarried men and was in close proximity to both the Chinese community and the red light fringe, young girls were cautioned not to tarry on their way to and from school. Indeed, Reeder's Alley lore includes murders, suicides and shootings. One tale that bears threads of truth had to do with George Mitchell, the last resident of the Butts' cabin whose death in 1938, according to the IR of June 7, 1953, was "shrouded in mystery." Mitchell raised chickens, sold eggs and poultry and ran a coal and wood business at the rear of the cabin from 1903 until he died in the mid-1930s. Mitchell, who had no family, left all his earnings in dollar bills and loose change lying on shelves, on the cabin floor, and stuffed in socks, tobacco cans and paper bags. Just before public auction of the cabin in 1939, a group of local women formed the Last Chance Gulch Restoration Association and arranged its purchase for \$450. In this way the Pioneer Cabin became one of the first preservation projects in the West.

George Duchesney owned Reeder's Alley by 1920, and its small apartments and dwellings were home to 32 single male tenants including a stock herder, a sheep herder, a cemetery caretaker, two fruit store proprietors and a hotel cook. Duchesney and his wife, Laura, lived at 200 West Cutler Street, which was the front apartment of the present-day Stonehouse. Duchesney, a groundman for the electric company, advertised "cabins for rent" in the 1920s city directories. Laura Duchesney was well known as a breeder of canaries and "bird doctor." She filled their small apartment with the little birds and their songs. An advertisement in the 1927 Polk city directory for Laura's canaries promised "excellent singers." When Laura died in 1933, the viewing was held at the Duchesneys' apartment. George remained at Reeder's Alley until his death a decade later.

By the 1950s, Reeder's Alley had become home to a number of pensioners. Owners Reed Matthews and Godfrey Sullivan supplied a need for low-rent housing for older folks on a small fixed income. But city planners had slated the "seedy" area, along with all nearby reminders of

Chinese occupation and red-light activities, for demolition as part of urban renewal. Reeder's Alley would be gone today but for the efforts of three Helena matrons who became its saviors in 1961.

Jane Tobin, Patricia Beodecker and Eileen Harper envisioned Reeder's Alley as an artists' colony and set about to clean it up. The three stone buildings at the top of the hill were their first purchase. They removed the four interior partitions in the largest structure, cleaned, painted, and connected the buildings. Sullivan offered to sell them the rest of Reeder's Alley, but it was home to 23 residents who could not afford to move. Sullivan spent months relocating every tenant. Only after everyone had found a new home did he finalize the sale to the women. The seeds of their vision are still viable today as a variety of businesses occupy the buildings.

And the tales about Reeder's Alley live on. A number of years ago, author Dick Pace wrote an unpublished article about Reeder's Alley in which he recounted the story of a world-renowned musician out for an evening stroll after a performance. As the visiting master passed through Reeder's Alley, he heard a resident musician playing for his neighbors. The visitor borrowed the instrument (perhaps a violin) and gave the pensioners a courtyard concert that other Helenans had paid to hear. For several hours, music caught the night breeze and drifted along the gulch.

**11. What are the current and projected revenues and expenses associated with the property? Is the property self-supporting or able to become self-supporting?**

The Association rents the Caretaker's House for \$325 per month. Annualized, this amounts to \$3,900. The grounds are rented to wedding parties and other special events. Annually another \$200 to \$300 is earned from rentals, etc. There is a donation box in the cabin for visitors wanting to assist, but fees are not charged for tours at this time. This is something that could be examined with an eye towards instituting a fee schedule for tours.

In past years the major annual expenses included taxes, garden maintenance, insurance, utilities/repairs, and misc. In 2005 these costs amounted to less than \$2,000 (taxes: \$576, garden maintenance: \$437, insurance: \$474, utilities/repairs: \$252, and miscellaneous: \$100). Please see the attached [Last Chance Gulch Restoration Association income/expense statement](#). The Association currently has a cash balance of just over \$3,500.

The endowment had a balance of \$55,710.90 as of 30<sup>th</sup> June 2005. Earnings from the endowment may be used to maintain the Cabin. Please see the attached [Gift Agreement](#) and [Pioneer Cabin Endowment](#) statement from the Montana Community Foundation.

The overall balance sheet currently indicates that there is positive cash flow for the Pioneer Cabin property, and the site is currently self-supporting. However, our experience with old buildings leads us to believe that as time goes on the buildings will need capital maintenance dollars. Given the nature of the site and the historical significance to both Helena and Montana, we expect that those yet-un-named dollar amounts would be obtainable from a variety of sources. Please see the response to Question #8 for additional details.



**12. Is the property an educational resource for the study and interpretation of Montana history?**

Yes. The Pioneer Cabin and its sister property Reeder's Alley provide the opportunity for a wide variety of educational programs. Each year school history and civics classes visit both properties. In addition, the sites are used for photo essays, photography settings, research, and leisure hiking. The limited outdoor interpretive signs are read by casual walkers and the students.

As mentioned above, the property holds many great stories associated with our past. At present, many Helena school kids visit the site each year. However, other than the signs, tours have very little to go by except by what is provided through human guiding services. Casual visitors have even less information available. A formal display, designed to function without staff, would provide an on-going service during weekday working hours.

The intactness of the facilities provided a solid basis for research and training opportunities. In addition, the Lewis and Clark Library is located just across Park Avenue, and there may be opportunity for some sort of cooperative learning programs.

**13. Describe the operations plan for the property.**

We would recommend few immediate changes to the current operations of the property.

The caretaker's residence would continue to be rented at the current rate. We would recommend that the duties of the occupant be spelled out in writing, including lawn care and watering. Long-term we would look for a person or couple who, in exchange for a reasonable rent, would carryout maintenance duties and open and staff the cabin on a regular basis for a certain number of hours per week.

Tours of the Pioneer Cabin and regular hours of operation could be established more immediately with organized and trained volunteers, although this would present some difficulties and cost additional staff time coordinating and training volunteers. Managing a site like this with only volunteer assistance presents many challenges, but being in an urban center makes those challenges more easily dealt with. Having the Cabin open on a regular basis would be an improvement over existing conditions, even if the Cabin were to start with being open one hour per day in the warmer months. We recommend an aggressive volunteer recruiting program to find people interested in maintaining the flowerbeds, staffing the cabin during open hours, tour guides, etc. The Association currently has a number of members interested and eager to assist.

Another option would be the use of interns to staff the cabin during summer months. Carroll College has an intern program and a strong History Department that has in the past expressed interest in the Cabin. Interns are not without costs, and the budget would have to be examined to see if income or other sources could fund this program.

We would recommend that the Lewis and Clark Library be formally approached with the idea of establishing a relationship that would take advantage of the Cabin. This could include a periodic reading hour either in or near the Cabin in the warmer months, programs that use Montana books

related to Montana and Helena's early days, rotating artifacts from the Cabin that could be displayed in the Library, and other educational activities. The Director of the Lewis and Clark Library, Judy Hart, has informally indicated that they would like to become involved with the Cabin.

We would recommend that the Last Chance Gulch Restoration Association remain intact and serve in an advisory capacity to the Commission regarding the Pioneer Cabin. The Association has cared for the property for many years and their expertise and administrative history would serve the property well. We would anticipate no more than two annual meetings for the Association to fulfill this role. The Association could use the publicity generated by a transfer of ownership to recruit new members for the Association.

The property is literally adjacent to the Reeder's Alley property, currently owned by the Commission. Two Commission staff are able to look out their office windows and see the Cabin during work hours. Management duties such as trash removal, lawn care, flower maintenance, etc would be addressed without a significant increase in staff workloads.

The Cabin and the House have much history and potential for educational opportunities. The potential training and research aspects of the property can easily be meshed into the Virginia City Institute.

#### **14. Conclusions and recommendations.**

Preservation of the Pioneer Cabin began on December 17, 1938, when former Montana First Lady Mrs. J. E. Erickson assembled a group of far-sighted citizens at the Helena, Montana Chamber of Commerce. They organized as the [Last Chance Gulch Restoration Association](#) and their purpose was to purchase the Pioneer Cabin, at that time a pitiful remnant from the gold rush. Please see the attached membership history of the Association. The cabin stood among the ruins of what was once the heart of the mining camp at Last Chance. Its last resident had recently died and the cabin was slated for sale at public auction. The small group of men and women, some of them children of Helena pioneers, had in mind to preserve and authentically furnish the quaint log cabin as a pioneer museum. They raised \$164 in donations and the rest by public subscription and purchased the cabin, a small house next door, and nine adjacent lots.

The project came about when preservation was an idea whose time had not yet come. Although the movement to preserve historic sites was underway at the national level in the 1930s, it was several decades before preservation became a community concern that culminated with the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. Nonetheless, the Helena group's idea came even before renowned preservationist Charles Bovey began the creation of Old Town at the Great Falls Fairgrounds in 1940. The group of Helena citizens was not interested in national trends. Its members simply recognized that the roots of their community were deeply planted along the sloping hillside. The two surviving cabins had witnessed Helena's evolution from camp to capital city and the group believed then, as we do now, that preservation of this legacy is important.

This territorial period neighborhood, including the Pioneer Cabin, the Caretaker's House, and the buildings of Reeder's Alley, collectively form the oldest intact piece of early Helena. The

various pieces have sheltered at various times miners, families, Chinese, prostitutes, laborers, and pensioners. The neighborhood's growth and evolution chronicle a significant part of Montana's heritage while telling a remarkable story of historic preservation.

Based on the above information, we recommend that the Commission proceed with the acquisition of this property. The site fits the criteria related to history, has a positive cash flow, and is in good condition. The Environmental Assessment and the Environmental Site Audit show no cause for alarm. These reports are appended to the Acquisition Feasibility Study. Intangible reasons include addressing the Commission's Legislative mandate to seek other heritage properties, and the economies of scale associated with managing the adjacent properties (i.e., Reeder's Alley).

Respectfully submitted,

Jeffrey Tiberi  
Executive Director  
Montana Heritage Preservation and Development Commission

Attached: [Outside Photos](#)  
[Environmental Assessment](#)  
[Hazardous Materials Report](#)  
[Historic Photos](#)  
[Conditions Assessment prepared by the State Historic Preservation Office](#)  
[Incomplete inventory of artifacts](#)  
[Interior Photos](#)  
[Last Chance Gulch Restoration Association income/expense statement](#)  
[Gift Agreement](#)  
[Pioneer Cabin Endowment](#)  
[Last Chance Gulch Restoration Association Membership History](#)

## **EXHIBIT B**

# **PIONEER CABIN AND CARETAKER'S HOUSE REAL PROPERTY ACQUISITION STUDY AND ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT**

## **Decision Notice**

**MONTANA HERITAGE COMMISSION  
HELENA, MONTANA  
14<sup>TH</sup> MARCH, 2006**

### Proposed Action

The owners of the Pioneer Cabin and the Caretaker's House, located in Helena, have offered to donate the site to the Montana Heritage Commission (MHC). A Real Property Acquisition Feasibility Study has been prepared to address criteria listed in the Commission's enabling statute and the acquisition rules promulgated under the authority of the statute (22-3-1001 MCA). Pioneer Cabin and the Caretaker's House meet the criteria established in the legislation. Both buildings have outstanding historical values, display exceptional qualities worth preserving, are genuinely representative of the state's culture and history, and demonstrate the ability to become economically self-supporting.

### Montana Environmental Policy Act

MHC assesses impacts of its proposals to the human and natural environments. The proposal to acquire these properties was discussed in a December 2005 Environmental Assessment (EA) to comply with the requirements of the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA). The EA was included in the Real Property Acquisition Feasibility Study.

A thirty-day (plus) comment period was open from 21<sup>st</sup> December 2005 through 14<sup>th</sup> March 2006. Public notification of the proposed action was publicized in legal notices printed in the Helena Independent Record. The weekly publication Queen City News published a notice of the public hearing.

### Summary of Public Comment

No telephone calls concerning the action were received by the MHC. One letter of support was received in support of the proposed action. Five members of the public attended a public hearing on 30<sup>th</sup> January 2006. There were no opponents at the public hearing.

## DECISION

Based on the information in the Draft EA, it is my decision to proceed with the proposed action and submit the proposal to the MHC for their consideration

Based on the analysis in the EA and the applicable laws, regulations and policies, I have determined that this action will not have a significant effect on the natural or human environment. Therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement will not be prepared.

The draft EA is hereby made the final document by this Decision Notice with no modifications or changes.

If you have any questions regarding this Decision Notice, please contact Jeffrey Tiberi, Executive Director, Montana Heritage Commission, at 406-443-2081, P.O.B. 201204, Helena, Montana 59620-1204, or at [jtiberi@mt.gov](mailto:jtiberi@mt.gov)

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Jeffrey Tiberi  
Executive Director  
Montana Heritage Commission  
14<sup>th</sup> March 2006



$$I' = 40'$$




